

NO PLACE TO LEARN

This book critically examines contemporary Canadian universities. It argues that their broader purposes are seldom probed thoroughly and critically. Canadian universities are worse off for this neglect. This book outlines our strong disagreement with the priorities of Canadian universities and presents a clear alternative. It criticizes universities' neglect of undergraduate education, challenges their emphasis on specialized research, and rejects their common claim that teaching and research harmoniously reinforce each other. In our opinion, Canadian universities no longer provide effective, high-quality undergraduate education.

Canadian universities are controversial early in the twenty-first century. Important debates are occurring about rising tuition, student debt, and access to universities. Concerns about political correctness in the classroom and in university hiring have attracted public attention. So too have perennial worries about the employment prospects of graduates and the relevance of university education for the workplace. Large numbers of Canadian professors will soon retire, to be replaced by a new generation. The priorities of this cadre of new professors will shape Canadian higher education well into the century. Debates will undoubtedly occur about the proper roles of universities and their new professors. The institution of tenure continues to attract criticism on and, more frequently, off campus. The political obsession during the 1990s with balanced budgets caused

governments to think more systematically about universities than they had in the past. Today, Canadian business leaders show unprecedented interest in the operation of universities. The annual survey of Canadian universities by *Maclean's* magazine both reflects and increases public awareness.

That said, debate about Canadian universities is episodic, seldom probing or philosophical. Its terms are increasingly dominated by the universities themselves, which skilfully argue their case. Universities in this country are poorly understood by citizens, by their students past and present, by media, by governments despite substantial public funding, and even by those who work within them. As a result, university priorities are seldom challenged or even debated. Universities, more so than any other powerful Canadian institution, sail on seas of unwarranted deference.

Canadians' general lack of awareness about institutions of higher education should not be surprising. Canadian universities enjoy a privileged position. They are primarily funded by taxpayers yet they enjoy considerable legal and political independence. Such independence is broadly accepted by Canadians and rests on the view that independent universities are integral to the quality of democracy. And while enrolment is increasing at Canadian universities, still only one in four Canadians will attend university. More importantly, Canadian universities are remarkably complex organizations. They undertake specialized research that is important for Canada's economic well-being but which is difficult for outsiders to understand and analyze. Universities teach an array of subjects to diverse students. They also provide public service that enriches society. For these reasons, universities seem remote and imposing.

Modern Canadian universities are internally complex. They are administratively divided into large faculties (such as science, medicine, law, and business) and then into departments, which yield further specialization. Many of the departments – anthropology, biochemistry, linguistics, and hematology to cite a few examples – pursue subjects whose intricacies are far removed from the daily lives of Canadians. Like all powerful institutions, universities employ an insider vocabulary that frustrates external scrutiny and makes difficult public debate about priorities. Universities speak about technology transfer, interdisciplinary studies, and postmodern interpretations of society. Research, the modern university's lifeblood, relies on insider terms such as “dominant paradigms,” “peer review,” and “research designs.”

In the breadth and complexity of its roles, Canadian universities differ from their simpler predecessors and from other large organizations in the public and private sectors. Management theory now asserts that effective organizations must establish priorities and shed activities that distract from their core businesses. Universities reject such advice and relentlessly add new roles. The modern university now sees itself as educator, researcher, and protector of culture and tradition, and, increasingly, as the “major agent of economic growth: the knowledge factory as it were, as the centre of the knowledge economy.”¹ As its roles proliferate, the university grows remote from the broader society, unwieldy in its organization and policy making and difficult to hold accountable.

The complexity of the modern university and the breadth of its activities have impressed many observers. Perhaps the most astute analyst is Clark Kerr, former chancellor of the University of California’s world-renowned Berkeley campus. Kerr coined the clever term “multiversity” to describe the large universities that emerged in the United States after the Second World War.² For Kerr, the university was no longer a simple community of scholars and students united by a search for a deeper understanding of nature and humankind. On the contrary, it was a series of specialized factions, disciplines, students, and research activities united only by occupancy of a common territory called the campus. In the multiversity, natural sciences (biology, chemistry, and physics, for example) are powerful, specialized, and increasingly separate from social sciences (such as economics, sociology, and political science) and humanities (philosophy and languages). The graduate schools, where students pursue masters’ and doctoral degrees, compete for scarce resources with the undergraduate programs.

In the multiversity, the major professional faculties, notably law and medicine, are primarily oriented toward their professions beyond the university. They have few relationships with other parts of the university. Universities now house independent research centres that have little or no relationship to teaching. Under university aegis, commercial firms are established and housed on campuses as universities assume new roles in the development and production of advanced goods and services. Governments, corporations, and alumni vie for influence over university priorities. Leadership in the multiversity is highly political. It cannot easily impose an intellectual vision, a common curriculum, or even common standards

in areas such as hiring and staff evaluation. Like democratic politicians, university administrative leaders – presidents, vice-presidents, deans, and leading members of boards of governors – broker deals between competing factions.

As workplaces, universities differ from other large organizations. This fact increases their mystique, makes them difficult to comprehend, and magnifies their distinctiveness. The professor's work is unlike almost any other occupation. Her obligation to undertake research is little understood by citizens and, in our experience, by most university students, who see their school as an instructional institution. Professors have remarkable control over the timing, nature, and even location of their work. They enjoy substantial freedom in the courses they teach and in how they teach them, in the subjects on which they undertake research, and in the performance of obligations to their students, their colleagues, and the university. Employment practices such as tenure and sabbatical leaves, although not unique to the university, expand the distance between the university and the society. Professors' deep commitment to their disciplines (primary areas of expertise) is little understood beyond the university. The idea that universities should be run as democracies makes them profoundly different from other large North American workplaces.

THE ARGUMENT IN BRIEF

Three themes dominate this book. First, modern Canadian universities wrongly and seriously devalue the education of undergraduate students. Undergraduate classes are too large, frequently taught by graduate students rather than professors, and often delivered in ridiculously impersonal and uninspired ways. This unacceptable situation has several causes, notably the prevailing view that universities are only partially teaching institutions. According to universities themselves, they are steadfastly committed to research. The corollaries of this view are twofold – all university professors must be teachers *and* researchers, and good research is *essential* to good teaching. These ideas, which took root in the 1960s, are now held as unquestioned truths by the vast majority of university professors and administrators in North America. On both empirical and philosophical grounds, we challenge the idea that teaching and research are mutually

reinforcing activities. Our view is that university research often detracts from the quality of teaching. We regret the continuing elevation of research and the systematic neglect of the quality of instruction. At this point, readers are urged to reflect on the following simple observation. In the 1990s, Canadian universities complained about underfunding, about crowded campuses, and about the deteriorating quality of education. Not one of them responded by increasing the teaching obligations of their permanent instructors. In fact, many managed to reduce even further the teaching activities of professors.

Our second theme is that university research, the activity that now outstrips teaching in importance, is often specialized and far removed from the needs of undergraduate students. Canadian universities suffer from their acceptance of research as a higher priority than teaching. A precise rationale for expensive research is seldom provided by universities or debated by the broader society.

We examine the distressingly conformist views in North American universities of the meaning of research, of the measurement of its significance, and of its relationship to national well-being. In particular, we note how Canadian universities now prize research that brings new facts to light. Such research, commonly called frontier research, holds sway. Frontier research has replaced reflective inquiry, a complex process involving disciplined thought about major issues and the quality of existing knowledge, as the dominant concept of university research. Frontier research and new discoveries enjoy unwarranted status. Reflective inquiry is badly undervalued by Canadian universities.

Our third concern is the increasingly close links between universities, governments, and large corporations. North American universities have undertaken economically significant research for most of the twentieth century. For one thing, they provide most of the trained personnel required for a modern economy. University research in science and engineering has been generally, although loosely, allied with national and corporate priorities. To deny this reality is to misunderstand profoundly Canadian higher education. Canadian universities, especially since the Second World War, have been closely linked with national economic and scientific objectives. The ivory tower has long since faded as a reality.

In the 1990s, Canadian universities charted new courses in their dealings

with business and governments. They became strongly committed to a particular view of economic development. Canadian universities now advocate the knowledge economy, a set of ideas about modern society and its underpinning economics. The idea of the knowledge economy rests on interrelated assertions about the need for university-based learning as a key to national prosperity, about the need for university-based research in science and computer studies, and about the imperative of retaining within Canada highly educated researchers. In this perspective, such economic factors as natural resources pale in comparison with national scientific and research prowess, high levels of government spending on research, and the sustenance of research universities.

Since the 1990s, Canadian universities have undertaken and promoted partnerships with corporations and governments for the development, marketing, and sale of particular products and industrial processes. Such relationships, which envision universities as economic agents rather than educational institutions, pose complex questions. They further challenge the quality and priority of university teaching. University priority setting is made more complex as higher education becomes intermingled with corporate and governmental policy.

These three basic problems – mediocre undergraduate teaching, an obsession with research, and an increasingly close relationship between universities, corporations, and governments – demand serious assessment of university priorities. To this end, we advocate four key propositions:

1. Universities must re-establish undergraduate teaching as their first priority. Undergraduate teaching must be recognized and valued for what it is: a complex and important activity that demands broad reading, disciplined thought, and great effort.
2. Universities must carefully reflect on the meaning and quality of research. In particular, research should be viewed much more broadly than it is at present. Professors must think about the human condition, embrace the major contributions of other disciplines, and show general knowledge. Universities should frankly admit that much of their research is of poor quality with little relevance or intrinsic merit.
3. Universities must come clean about the relationship between teaching and research. The present view that teaching and research go

- hand in hand must be replaced by the more compelling view that teaching and research generally conflict with one another. Both activities, to be performed well, are enormously time-consuming. They involve different skills and impose contrary obligations on professors.
4. Universities must examine how research partnerships with corporations shape the quality and nature of research. Careful consideration must also be given to the impact of such partnerships on overall university priorities. Partnerships that distort university priorities should, if operative, be abandoned or not proceeded with in the first instance.

Before proceeding, we want to be crystal clear about some basic points. First, we are deeply committed to university ideals, especially the principle that independent universities must be sites for the pursuit of truth. We believe that Canadian universities have made major contributions to the quality of Canadian society. On a personal note, university life has afforded us great opportunities for personal growth, intellectual freedom, and fulfilling lives. That said, universities are powerful, independent institutions that require vigorous criticism. Americans, including many distinguished university presidents, have often been highly critical of universities. The vigour of higher education in the United States is undoubtedly partially attributable to this tradition of self-examination. Second, we hold many conventional views. We accept the institution of tenure. And while we call for significantly improved teaching, we also believe that professors must undertake research and publication. In fact, our standards for research would be much higher than present in Canadian universities. Moreover, we see high-quality research, especially in science and medicine, as essential to Canadian well-being. We fully accept that universities are, and must be, sites for outstanding research, whether it be reflective inquiry or frontier research. In the matter of research, we challenge the view that research is, and must be, a fundamental obligation of all professors and all universities. We also believe that large amounts of frontier research are of low quality, minimal relevance, and little long-term value. Third, we do not see universities as ivory towers, distant from the world around them. On the contrary, universities should render thoughtful service to society. Their teaching, to be effective, must be relevant to societal needs. In fact, we argue that good university teaching *always* increases students' employability, albeit often in

subtle ways. Finally, we are not impassioned advocates of liberal education. Faculties of Arts, the centrepieces of liberal education, are obviously important. Science and engineering are equally fundamental to understanding the human condition.

This book is unapologetically aimed at general readers. We try to explain how Canadian universities operate and how they *should* operate. We challenge conventional wisdom, pose alternatives, and argue for reforms. We hope professors in Canada (and elsewhere) read this book carefully and reflectively. We also hope they see merit in our ideas and suggested reforms.

BROADER INFLUENCES

We are “insiders” who have spent our adult lives studying and teaching at Canadian universities. We have been graduate or undergraduate students at Queen’s University, Carleton University, and the University of Toronto. We have spent our careers as instructors at the University of Alberta with stints at Acadia and the University of Victoria. Insider status undoubtedly brings with it biases and assumptions of which we are unaware. At the same time, we note that modern universities have seldom been explored satisfactorily by outsiders. The most influential scholarship, with almost no exceptions, has been done by university professors or by university administrators. This fact attests to the remarkable complexity of the university as an institution, to the diversity of its goals, and to its distinctive culture as compared with corporations and governments.

As noted, this book does not lament the decline of liberal education, the weakening of traditional curriculum, or the underfunding of humanities and social sciences. These concerns are examined but in the context of the expansion of medical sciences, the growth of engineering in Canadian universities, and the expansion of scientific and professional education in general. Science and medicine, not liberal arts, dominate the modern university, shape its priorities, and determine its relations with society. Reforms that are rooted in nostalgic appeals to the traditions of liberal education are doomed to failure. Nor do we urge a vision of some glorious past that we wish to recreate. Indeed, even a cursory examination of the history of higher education cautions against embrace of a golden age. The nineteenth-century North American college, generally run by an

organized religion, has been described as “depressing and sterile.”³ That said, our call for significantly improved undergraduate teaching inevitably appeals to yesteryear for the simple reason that, until the 1970s, undergraduate teaching was the preeminent role of Canadian universities.

In undertaking this study, we became convinced that interpretations of modern universities systematically exaggerate the influence of forces external to the university. They seriously underestimate universities’ capacity to shape their own destinies and the broader society. Early in the twenty-first century, critics and supporters see universities as shaped by four powerful external forces, although such observers differ in the weight they attach to each of them. The four powerful forces are business and the capitalist economy, the funding and policy priorities of democratic governments, the imperatives of advanced computer technology, and finally, changing societal expectations and demographics that, seen together, establish a culture of life-long learning. We acknowledge these forces and their importance for higher education. Our view is simply that the university has considerable independence of response. It responds to external forces but also shapes them and society’s views about higher education. Large universities do not passively receive society’s signals and pressures. They are powerful institutions with priorities, strategies, and philosophies.

Two forces shape Canadian universities’ responses to the broader society. First, university policy making is driven by the priorities, interests, and political objectives of their permanent professors. In no major area of academic life have external forces trumped professorial power or preferences. The dominant views of the university – that all its members must teach and do research, that teaching and research are interdependent activities, and that the university is a central part of the knowledge economy – are endorsed by Canadian professors. Moreover, no external body, including government, can easily impose its priorities on a university in the face of concerted opposition of their professors. To this end, readers are reminded that both the Harris Common Sense Revolution in Ontario and the Klein Revolution in Alberta started with ambitious projects of university reform. Neither made much headway in fundamental university reform. Second, the priorities of Canadian universities are heavily shaped by higher education in the United States and by an interuniversity struggle for prestige and recognition. Canadian universities take their cues one from the other

and from their American “competitors” rather than from the society at large. They are imitative rather than independent in their policy making. It is for this reason that universities offer almost identical visions of teaching and research.

The philosophies of the large, internationally recognized American research universities such as Harvard, Princeton, the University of Michigan, Stanford, and the University of California at Berkeley are influential in the struggle for university prestige. These universities are the models, the trend-setters in research, the training grounds for future intellectual elites, and allegedly the intellectual heart of the Western world. Their significance is captured by the lament that Canada lacks a single university of their stature and that the national interest suffers as a result. The graduate schools of the elite American research universities (where students do advanced research for doctorates) are particularly influential in defining trends and shaping the policies of other universities. For this reason, major reforms normally begin within an elite American university (or group of them) and move sometimes slowly, sometimes quickly, through the continental system. Innovations in higher education radiate from elite American universities and in this country from the University of Toronto, McGill University, and the University of British Columbia.

Canadian views about universities are heavily influenced by American ideals. In this regard, a unique institution – the American research university – looms large.⁴ Even harsh critics admire the undoubted achievements of America’s research universities. Leading American research universities are the crown jewels of higher education. They are said to be the vanguards of economic and social progress; successful blends of excellent teaching, research, and public service; and major forces in the intellectual life of the democratic world. They are models, the standard to which others aspire, sources of great American pride, and allegedly determinants of America’s world dominance. Such sentiments are partially captured in a recent analysis of undergraduate teaching in American research universities: “Their graduates fill the legislatures and board rooms of the country, write the books we read, treat our ailments, litigate our issues, develop our new technologies, and provide our entertainment. To an overwhelming degree, they have furnished the cultural, intellectual, economic, and political leadership of the nation.”⁵

We too admire the achievements of American research universities. But they are not models to be slavishly imitated by Canadians. Moreover, major differences exist between higher education in Canada and higher education in the United States that must be constantly borne in mind. Canadians often hear references to the wonders of major American universities. The reputations of Yale, Princeton, and Stanford are well known to Canadians. In twenty-first-century Canada, their appeal undoubtedly outstrips that of Oxford and Cambridge for young Canadians. However, Canadians know much less about the weak undergraduate teaching that occurs within such universities. They also hear little about the quality of the thousands of lesser American universities and colleges, which educate many more students than the elite universities and which are generally inferior to Canadian universities.

We hope this book is recognizable as the work of professional political scientists. Three themes, heavily stressed by modern political science, shape it. First, modern political science now accepts that governments actively shape, not merely reflect, societal preferences and attitudes.⁶ In this vein, we see the modern university as a political force that aggressively shapes its environment. Universities like to convey an image of weakness. They seldom mention their close links to governments and corporate leaders, their capacity to create demand for their services, and their remarkable freedom from systematic examination by mass media. Second, we see Canadian universities as political systems whose major problems must be addressed as political issues. Why, for example, are undergraduate students the weakest group in the university even though numerically they are the largest group, even though they provide large amounts of operating revenue through tuition fees, and even though their education is widely thought to be at the heart of the university's mandate? Why do university administrators and professors lament their diminished status and the declining quality of their institutions when outside observers see universities as powerful economic forces? Why is the modern university simultaneously criticized for being too distant from and too close to the broader society? Such questions are clearly political ones and are addressed as such. Finally, our study is driven by a strong desire to reform the university. Reforming zeal is well known to political scientists who have long worried about the quality of democracy. Like democracy, higher education evokes strong emotions and differing viewpoints.

Despite the critical tone of this book, we are not pessimistic about the future. Universities, despite their embrace of tradition and despite their image as never-changing institutions, actually change frequently and quickly. Nothing in the history of universities suggests a clear, inevitable path for their development. While we see no quick demise of the research imperative, it may well recede to be replaced by a stronger commitment to serious undergraduate teaching. We outline a number of possible developments in our conclusions.

METHODOLOGY

This book rests on a methodology with three strands. First, we studied the literature on higher education in Canada. We quickly concluded that this literature is very sparse and heavily influenced by the vast American material on higher education. We then immersed ourselves in the American literature and studied its major works. Much of our time was spent reflecting on the issues raised and thinking about their implications for Canada. In this sense, we tried to practise the reflective inquiry that we preach. Second, we undertook interviews with faculty members at several Canadian universities.⁷ These were done to get a feel for faculty concerns and priorities at several universities and in a number of different disciplines. Finally, many of our arguments are inspired by our experiences as professors over the last two decades. Our views are shaped by thousands of conversations with students and colleagues at many universities, by participation in university decision making at various levels, and by observation of different universities in Canada and occasionally in other countries. A particularly influential experience was team-teaching a senior undergraduate class on the Canadian university on two occasions in the mid-1990s. Through those courses, we had an opportunity to reflect on many of the issues we are writing about and to hear students express perceptive views about higher education in Canada. In adopting this research strategy, we are following the lead of many other observers of higher education in North America. The major books on universities invariably rest on careful reading, long observation of universities in action, and personal experience within universities.

We occasionally construct hypothetical cases of events and problems at Canadian universities. We do this to provide insight into the intricacies of

university politics and decision making. The cases are constructed to give a “hands on” feel for some of the issues and to communicate the rhythms, routines, and patterns of professorial life to readers outside the university.

A number of controversial topics are given short shrift in this book. These include debates about the impact of political correctness on Canadian campuses, controversies about appropriate levels of tuition, and arguments about whether admission requirements should be made more demanding. Such issues are important and merit debate. In our opinion, they are secondary in importance to, and derivative of, the relationships between teaching and research.

This book makes no overt contribution to ongoing debates about public policy toward universities or to broader ideological debates about the role of education. In this regard, we anticipate that some of our thoughts will be borrowed liberally by various hardline critics of universities. But potential borrowers should be cautious. Some conservatives might take our comments about research and teaching and use them to justify further cut-backs to university funding and independence. Such an interpretation would be unwarranted. We exhibit no sympathy for conservative educational views. We are sceptical about markets, certain forms of university-business partnerships, and the use of universities for vocational training. Nor do we share conservative hostility toward affirmative action, feminist ideology, or political correctness. We endorse neither a great-books curriculum nor a back-to-basics educational philosophy. At the end of the day, many of our proposals – for campuses that are more student-friendly, for a redefinition of research and research priorities, for significantly improved teaching – will cause higher education to be much more expensive than at present. They cannot be easily used by anti-university forces.

By the same token, those on the left might see some of our arguments about corporate influence as supportive of their views. But to restate, we see universities as autonomous, independent actors who exercise choice. In our view, they cannot be portrayed as instruments of capitalist rule. Moreover, many readers on the left are unlikely to support some of our views about university priorities in the sphere of teaching. Many left-leaning analyses of universities, while deeply concerned about business power on campus, say little about other basic reforms.

Another general point merits attention. Upon reflection, it is remarkable

how, through the deficit-ridden 1990s, universities internalized the view that democratic governments have reduced their financial support for higher education apparently forever. Indeed, a pervasive theme in higher education policy making is the search for alternative funding. The key proposition is that universities face ever-increasing costs and declining government support. As a basic priority they must therefore fund their operations by finding money elsewhere. But in postdeficit Canada, is it obvious that governments have forsaken higher education? Is it not possible that higher education will receive better funding from governments, thereby allowing universities to strengthen teaching and to advance a more wholesome view of research?

THE ORGANIZATION OF THE BOOK

Chapter 2 examines the development of Canadian universities. It notes how they are an amalgam of American, English, German, and Scottish influences. It probes the expansion of Canadian universities in the twentieth century, the growth of research and graduate studies in the 1960s, and the rise of science and medicine as university powerhouses. Chapter 3 provides a detailed hypothetical account of a typical academic career in Canada. It conveys a sense of the obligations and concerns of tenured faculty members. It tries to provide a feel for day-to-day life in a Canadian university from the vantage point of a professor. It highlights university routines, professorial priorities, and key steps in a professor's career.

Chapter 4 probes the poor state of undergraduate teaching at Canadian universities. It argues that teaching is the university's preeminent role. It then establishes elements of good teaching and shows why good teaching cannot be achieved without major changes. Chapter 5 examines research on Canadian campuses. It notes how research plays a major role in all disciplines, in all Canadian universities, and for all professors regardless of their ideological convictions, political views, or intellectual orientations. It criticizes universities for allowing a very narrow vision of research to dominate. The chapter points to major discrepancies between ideals of university research and university research as presently practised in Canada. Chapter 6 examines the interplay between teaching and research. It focuses on the report of the Commission of Inquiry on Canadian University Education

(hereafter cited as the Smith Report). Authored by Stuart Smith, former leader of the Liberal Party of Ontario, and commissioned by the Association of Universities and Colleges of Canada, the Smith Report shocked Canadian universities by challenging established wisdom about teaching and research.⁸ Smith challenged university assertions that teaching is improved when it is undertaken by professors who are active researchers.

Chapter 7 examines ethics in Canadian universities. It argues that competitive universities sometimes breed misconduct and secrecy. Chapter 8 examines the view that universities must link themselves with businesses in the development of profitable goods and services. It reviews university fundraising, advertising, and management practices. It also examines industry-sponsored research. Chapter 8 considers the impact of research partnerships on the quality of teaching and universities' capacity to remain sites of independent analysis.

Chapter 9 reviews conventional wisdom about university reform. It challenges common claims that universities will be much improved by the further application of computer technology, by the removal of tenure, and by the wider introduction of market forces into their operations. We also dissect assertions that Canada would benefit greatly from the development of one or more "world class" research universities. Chapter 10 advances some solutions. Among other things, it calls for rigorous enforcement of university claims that teaching is equal to research as a priority and for more exacting assessment of the quality of research.

